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Editors

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Volume 2
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Looking for Consensus?: Civil Society, Social Movements and Crises for Public Management

John Diamond
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Editors

CIVIL SOCIETY, THE LEFT AND COMMUNITY ORGANISING: TOWARDS A PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

Paul Bunyan

ABSTRACT

Purpose – *This chapter reviews critically the policy developments in the United Kingdom since 2010 with the adoption by the coalition of 'community organising' as both a concept and practice.*

Design – *The chapter is an extensive literature review informed by critical thinking and reflection.*

Findings – *The chapter argues that the model adopted in the United Kingdom is unlikely to address the power imbalances between civil society organisations and the state and that there needs to be a more critical and reflective assessment of the potential of civil society agencies to influence public policy in a progressive way.*

Implications/originality: – *The chapter is intentionally speculative.*

Keywords: Alinsky; civil society; community organising; London citizens

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INTRODUCTION

The banking collapse and global financial crisis of recent years raises important questions about human agency and the extent to which people in their localities and institutions can in any way challenge or resist such structural forces. Despite the scale and impact of the crisis, the state–market nexus, which from the 1970s onwards advanced neo-liberal forms of capitalism throughout much of the world, has remained intact. In the face of what would appear to be overbearing economic and political forces, attention has turned towards civil society both in terms of its potential to ameliorate the effects of the crisis and in more radical terms challenge neo-liberal hegemony.

This chapter considers this turn towards civil society and the possibilities for a progressive politics bringing together interests from the Left and civil society to challenge neo-liberal hegemony. Adherents of the Left and civil society are of course not mutually exclusive – many within civil society, whether overtly political or not, would subscribe to a politics more left than right, more socialist than individualist, more state- than market-oriented. However, in terms of people's institutional loyalties, their associational activities and how they expend their energies and resources, a distinction can be drawn between those who are more civil society-oriented than state-oriented and vice versa. The first part of the chapter examines the nature of the relationship between the Left and civil society. Historically, it has been the state which has been the almost exclusive focus and concern of the Left in considering social and political change. Drawing upon recent analysis by Richard Sennett, the ambivalence that has often marked the left's stance towards civil society as a credible locus of social and political change is examined. The second part of the chapter focuses on community organising as an approach to developing agency and building power within civil society. In the United Kingdom, community organising has divided opinion amongst activists on the left, many of whom see it as a form of communitarianism and a distraction to the fundamental task of securing state-led solutions to issues of social justice. Its association in recent years with the 'Big Society', the flagship policy idea of the Conservative Party's 2010 general election manifesto, has served to confirm suspicion that the focus upon civil society and community organising represents nothing more than a mask for the public cuts implemented by the coalition government. The argument set forth in this chapter is that a new progressive politics is required which both recognises the role of the state in creating the

social, economic and political conditions for a fair and just society but also the critical role of civil society in contesting state and market power and pushing the boundaries of civility and social justice. Despite its limitations, it is argued that community organising provides an important vehicle for developing a progressive politics capable of aligning interests from the Left and civil society to contest the public sphere and to challenge neo-liberal hegemony.

Neo-Liberal Co-Option of 'Civil Society'

It is important to start with an analysis of the ways in which, what Harvey (2005) has termed 'the neo-liberal state', promoted both by New Labour and the current Conservative-led coalition, commandeered terms such as 'civil society', 'community' and 'partnership' to political narratives which consolidated neo-liberal hegemony and promoted a consensus-based understanding of social and political change. For New Labour in 1997 the narrative was about a 'Third Way', charting a course between the state and market, and linked to this the notion of 'partnership' between the state, market and civil society. The market, under Thatcherism, had brought increased prosperity for many but at the expense of increasing inequality throughout society at large. Distancing itself from the past and the party's perceived enmity towards the market, part of what the 'new' in New Labour was designed to project, was a political project that countenanced – some might say embraced – the market, albeit within a regulatory framework which was meant to curb the market's natural propensity towards excess (history has not been kind in this regard and Gordon Brown on his defeat as New Labour leader in the 2010 general election, perhaps not surprisingly, remarked that his greatest regret was not regulating the market more). Partnership was the hallmark of the Third Way. On assuming power, New Labour very quickly courted the so-called 'Third Sector' or civil society, proclaiming partnership between the state, market and civil society as the way forward in promoting effective social, economic and political change

For the Conservatives in the run up to the 2010 election, the narrative or 'big idea' was the 'Big Society'. The market had clearly failed, plunging the country into economic, political and social crisis. However, as the party most closely associated with the market, the Conservatives developed what turned out to be an effective political narrative which sought to deflect

attention away from market failure, blaming New Labour's profligacy in managing the economy and creating a bloated state, as the primary reason for the crisis. In terms of the 'solution' (or at least an important part of the solution), the Conservatives, like New Labour over a decade before, turned to civil society. According to Cameron New Labour's focus upon the state had disenfranchised local communities – the Big Society would shift power away from the state towards civil society, empowering people to take more responsibility for their communities, including the provision of public services previously delivered by the state.

A parallel can be drawn here between New Labour's focus upon 'partnership' and the Conservatives take on the 'Big Society' (Bunyan, 2013). Underpinning the rhetoric of both 'partnership' and the 'Big Society' is the assumption of a shift in power away from the state and market towards civil society. In fact the opposite has largely been the case. Under neo-liberalism the state–market nexus retained control putting in place 'managerial technologies' and governance arrangements which significantly constrained the practices of civil society or third sector organisations. For example, under New Labour and 'partnership' the Third Sector was radically reshaped and restructured:

> Large voluntary organizations became quasi-governmental in nature, taking on large-scale services previously undertaken by the state, while smaller voluntary organizations, through commissioning processes, were brought much more under the controlling auspices of the state. This effectively led to a 'hollowing out' and depoliticization of much of the third sector. (Bunyan, 2013, p. 123)

Glasman, in his analysis of the impact of the state–market nexus upon civil society, sees it as being fundamentally detrimental. He says:

> If the state becomes the ultimate source of collective power and the market that of money, then it is not surprising that society – the third sphere, and source of reciprocity and association – finds itself impoverished and powerless. As self-funded dues-paying associations become weaker, the institutions of society become increasingly dependent on the state and the market, and so are less capable of pursuing their own interests and values. (Glasman, 2010, p. 59)

Language has played a fundamental role in the entrenchment of neo-liberalism. Garrett (2009), in his analysis of the 'transformation' of children's services, draws attention to how power relations operate through language and how keywords often imperceptibly contribute to the solidifying of neo-liberal hegemony. Examples of such keywords and terms include 'flexibility', 'empowerment', 'partnership', 'Big Society', 'social entrepreneur' etc. Quoting Harvey, such language, according to Garrett, shapes the way we see the world and accept change, becoming 'so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question' (Harvey, 2005, p. 5).

The Left and Civil Society

In an article entitled 'A Creditable Left' published in *The Nation* in August 2011, sociologist, philosopher and self-confessed 'Lefty' Richard Sennett reflects upon the collapse of the financial system in 2008 as well as his hopes that it might have heralded a rising up against the 'Capitalist Beast', as governments and voters moved to the left in response. That this didn't materialise causes Sennett to ponder on the predicament faced by activists on the left today. He says,

> The unpalatable fact is that we, the ardent Left, count for less and less in the public's thinking about how to live together. And if that has long been true in the United States, where the Left has occupied only a small corner of public discourse, the decay of the left now marks the old Western European homelands, as in Sweden or Britain. The word 'progressive' seems no more arousing than 'social democracy'. Though progressive think tanks abound in America and Europe, and churn out worthy proposals for social justice, policy-wonkery seems to induce an eyes-glazed-over indifference among the larger public. (2011, p. 24)

In thinking about how the Left can become more creditable in people's eyes, Sennett sees the problem as being more social than ideological. 'Creditability', he comments, 'lies more in the realm of receptiveness than assertiveness' (p. 24). By this, Sennett infers that those on the left have to be less concerned with winning an argument and more concerned with getting alongside people – understanding the importance of 'presence' in politics – to discuss on equal terms issues that matter and how best to live. Sennett believes a certain kind of politics follows – 'It should concentrate more on civil society than electoral politics – particularly electoral politics at the national level' (p. 24).

Historically, tensions have long existed on the left about the value of civil society in thinking about social and political change. Marx was dismissive of civil society seeing it as a camouflage for the domination of the capitalist class (Alexander, 2006). It was Gramsci, a later disciple of Marx, who recognised, in his concept of hegemony, the contingent nature of social and political change and the potential of civil society to impact the existing relations of power. According to Powell, Gramsci recognised that social change had to be negotiated democratically – it could not come about solely by the capture or imposition of the state. As Powell (2007, p. 81) says, 'The